

East Chicago Drinking Water FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions About East Chicago Drinking Water

Q. How does lead enter the drinking water?

A. The most common way that lead enters drinking water is through the corrosion of lead or galvanized iron plumbing. Across the country, lead and galvanized iron was a common material used for plumbing in many older homes. In a large percentage of these older homes, lead plumbing can be found in the service line, either in the utility portion of the service line from the main to the curb-stop or in the customer portion of the service line from the curb stop to the interior piping. However, lead can also be found beyond the service line in the interior house piping, lead solder, and brass or chrome-plated brass faucets. Though galvanized steel and copper became more popular as plumbing pipe materials in the 1960s, lead piping and solder was not federally banned until 1986 and faucets could contain up to 8% lead until 1996.

Q. Why did EPA sample drinking water in some homes in East Chicago?

A. EPA did these tests on a pilot basis for the first 43 homes that were excavated in zones 2 and 3. Street or construction work can sometimes disturb the “service lines” that carry water from the mains in the street through the yard into the home. When lead (or galvanized iron) service lines are disturbed, there is a chance that small particles of lead can break off and get into drinking water. Like many older cities across the nation, East Chicago has a large percentage of service lines made of lead. It is likely that many homes in East Chicago have service lines that are made of - or contain – lead. In addition, lead plumbing components in some homes could also cause increase lead levels.

Q. Who owns the service lines that carry drinking water from the water main to my home?

A. The homeowner owns the service lines from the meter pit to the home. The water utility owns the service lines from the meter pit to the water main.

Q. What did the sampling results show?

A. Right now, EPA doesn’t have enough information to determine whether excavation is impacting lead levels in zones 2 and 3. However, EPA’s preliminary data shows that -- before excavation -- 18 homes had lead levels in tap water that exceeded the action level of 15 parts per billion. There is no safe level of lead exposure. EPA has notified the Indiana Department of Environmental Management and the city about the results from EPA’s pilot project. IDEM has been working with the city to ensure that corrosion control treatment is being introduced into the water at a high enough level to increase the coating of the lines and reduce lead levels in your home.

Q. How long should zone 2 and 3 residents who participated in the pilot use the water filter provided by EPA?

A. As part of the pilot, EPA installed filters on kitchen taps of participants. EPA recommends that participants continue to use the filter until further notice. Aerators should be cleaned on weekly basis. Filter cartridges should be replaced regularly. Unfiltered tap water can be used to wash dishes, clothes, and clean homes. It can also be used for showers and children’s baths.

Q. I live in East Chicago but wasn't part of the pilot study. I'm concerned about lead in my drinking water – what should I do?

A. According to EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, you can reduce or eliminate your exposure to lead in drinking water by using a water filter certified to remove lead for cooking, drinking, and baby formula or by running the kitchen tap on cold for at least 5 minutes before using any tap water for drinking or cooking. Children and pregnant women are especially vulnerable to the effects of lead. Hot water can contain higher levels of lead, so use only cold water for eating, drinking, and brushing your teeth. Boiling water will not remove lead.

Q. Is the City of East Chicago in compliance with applicable drinking water standards for lead?

A. Yes. The city of East Chicago has been in full compliance with the EPA's "Lead and Copper Rule" since 1993. The city meets all applicable federal and state rules concerning lead and copper in drinking water. IDEM has been working with the city to ensure that the corrosion control treatment is being introduced into the water at a high enough level to increase the coating of the lines to reduce lead leaching from the pipes, therefore reducing lead levels in your home. The city of East Chicago routinely tests for lead in drinking water and you can view the lead testing results on your Consumer Confidence Report (CCR).

Q. Why are there high lead levels if the city of East Chicago is in compliance with the Lead and Copper Rule?

A. The required compliance testing done the by city is different from EPA's sampling for the pilot project in zones 2 and 3. Compliance testing measures lead levels throughout the city's entire drinking water distribution system. The sequential sampling for the pilot project measures lead levels throughout an individual's homes piping system from the water main to the street to the tap which is more rigorous series of tests. On a national level, EPA is actively considering potential revisions to the Lead and Copper Rule. The primary goal is to improve the effectiveness of the rule in reducing exposure to lead and copper from drinking water. EPA anticipates proposed rule changes soon. More information can be found at www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-10/documents/508_lcr_revisions_white_paper_final_10.26.16.pdf.

Q. Did EPA test for other metals?

A. EPA performed sequential sampling for many different chemical contaminants and is also conducting other water quality testing to comprehensively evaluate the effects of excavation at the superfund site. All of the final results will be shared with participants, the city and the state.

Q. Can water contaminated with lead hurt me or my children?

A. Lead exposure can affect nearly every system in the body. It may not have obvious symptoms, so people might not realize they have too much lead in their bodies. For young children, exposure to lead can cause behavior problems and learning disabilities. The only way to know if you have lead in your body is to get tested. EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) agree that there is no known safe blood lead level in children. Residents interested in getting their children's blood lead level tested can contact the East Chicago Health Dept. at 219-391-8467.

Q. Is it safe for adults to shower or bathe with the water? Can babies be bathed in tap water?

A. Yes. Your skin does not absorb lead in water. Bathing and showering in unfiltered water is still safe for children and adults. It is safe even if the skin has minor cuts or scrapes. However, never drink bathwater, and do not allow babies and children to drink bathwater.

Q. Is it safe to wash dishes and do laundry with unfiltered water?

A. Yes, but dry them after. Wash dishes, bottles, and toys with unfiltered soapy water. Dry before use. Lead in water will not be absorbed by porcelain, metal, or glass. Clothes washed in plain tap water will not contain enough lead to cause harm.

Q. EPA provided a filter after excavation, but how do I know the filter is working?

A. EPA tested the use of filters and confirmed they are effective in removing lead from drinking water, even at high levels. Please note that filters are effective when used properly --only cold water should be filtered; cartridges must be replaced on a regular basis per manufacturer's instructions.

Q. Will whole house filters or reverse-osmosis filters work better?

A. A whole-home filter may not be effective because it does not treat water that flows through interior pipes, brass, and leaded-solder, which can contaminate the water with lead even after it has passed through a whole-home filter. Any water treatment filter used should be National Sanitation Foundation Standard 53 (NSF-53) certified to remove lead and should be located at the end of the plumbing right before the tap, so that all water that flows through home plumbing is treated. The certification label is typically displayed on the package and the filter.

Q. How can I get my home's drinking water tested for lead?

A. You can have your home's water tested for lead on your own by contacting a laboratory certified by the Indiana State Department of Health for analysis of lead in drinking water. A list of those laboratories can be found on IDEM's Drinking Water at Lead web page at <http://www.in.gov/idem/6968.htm>

Q. How can I check my Home's Water pipes for lead?

If the plumbing in your home is accessible, you may be able to inspect your own plumbing. Otherwise, call your water provider or hire a plumber. More information can be found on EPA's website at www.epa.gov/flint/advice-flint-residents.

Q. Is this related to the USS Lead Superfund Site near my home?

A. No. It is not possible for lead from contaminated soil to get into your tap water. If there is elevated lead in your tap water, it is most likely due to the presence of lead in your service lines and/or the plumbing in your home.